

Basic Facts Alcohol

Alcohol is the oldest and most widely used drug in the world. Nearly half of all Americans over the age of 12 are consumers of alcohol. Although most drink only occasionally or moderately, there are an estimated 10 to 15 million alcoholics or problem drinkers in the United States, with more than 100,000 deaths each year attributed to alcohol. Among the nation's alcoholics and problem drinkers are as many as 4.5 million adolescents, and adolescents are disproportionately involved in alcohol-related automobile accidents, the leading cause of death among Americans 15 to 24 years old.

Dealing with drunkenness and with alcohol-related accidents, crime, violence, and disturbances consumes more resources than any other aspect of police operations, while the health consequences of alcohol abuse add enormously to national health care costs. Illegal drugs can be more rapidly addicting than alcohol and may well have a more powerful effect on human behavior, but the high level of alcohol consumption, which is many times greater than the level of illegal drug use, makes it one of America's most serious drug problems.

What is Alcohol?

Alcohol is the name given to a variety of related compounds; the drinkable form is ethanol, or ethyl alcohol. It is a powerful, addictive, central nervous system depressant produced by the action of yeast cells on carbohydrates in fruits and grains.

A liquid that is taken orally, alcohol is often consumed in copious quantities. Surveys of adolescent and young adult drinkers indicate that they are particularly likely to drink heavily with the intention of getting drunk—often every time they drink.

There are three basic types of alcoholic drinks.

Beer is made from fermented grains and has an alcohol content of three to six percent.

Wine is made from fermented fruits and has an alcohol content of 11 to 14 percent. Some wine drinks, such as wine coolers, have fruit juice and sugar added, lowering alcohol content to between four and seven percent. Fortified wines, such as port, have alcohol added, bringing alcohol content to between 18 and 20 percent.

Liquor is made by distilling a fermented product to yield a drink that usually contains 40 to 50 percent alcohol. The alcohol content in liquor is sometimes indicated by degrees of proof, which in the United States is a figure twice as high as the percentage. Thus, 80-proof liquor is 40 percent alcohol.

A 12-ounce glass of beer, a 5-ounce glass of wine, and a 1.5-ounce shot of liquor all contain the same amount of alcohol and, therefore, have an equal effect on the drinker. All three forms of alcohol have the same potential for intoxication and addiction.

Alcohol in the United States

Alcohol was brought to America by the earliest European settlers. By the Nineteenth Century, alcohol abuse had become so widespread that a large segment of the population regarded it as a social crisis. **Alcoholism had a devastating impact on families**, for most alcoholics were men, whose addiction often led them to abuse or abandon their families. If they suffered disabling injuries or were killed in accidents, fights, or while committing crimes, their families were left destitute. In response, the Temperance Movement, led mainly by women, arose to combat the social ills created by alcohol abuse.

The **Temperance Movement** achieved its main goal in 1919, when the nation narrowly approved Prohibition, the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which made it illegal to sell alcohol or transport it for sale. (Possession for personal use was not criminalized.) During Prohibition's 15-year life, alcohol consumption dropped markedly, as did deaths caused by cirrhosis of the liver and admissions to mental hospitals for alcohol-related depression. Nevertheless, the categorical proscription of alcohol became increasingly unpopular, and Prohibition was repealed in 1933.

How Does it Affect You?

When a person consumes alcohol, the drug acts on nerve cells deep in the brain. Alcohol initially serves as a stimulant, then induces feelings of relaxation and reduced anxiety. Consumption of two or three drinks in an hour can impair judgment, lower inhibitions, and induce mild euphoria. Five drinks consumed in two hours may raise the blood alcohol level to 0.10 percent, high enough to be considered legally intoxicated in every state. Once a drinker stops drinking, his or her blood alcohol level decreases by about 0.01 percent per hour.

Signs and symptoms of alcohol use and intoxication:

- Smell of alcohol on breath
- Irritability
- Euphoria
- Loss of physical coordination
- Inappropriate or violent behavior
- Loss of balance
- Unsteady gait
- Slurred and/or incoherent speech

- Loss of consciousness
- Slowed thinking
- Depression
- Impaired short-term memory
- Blackouts

Signs and symptoms of alcohol withdrawal, experienced by alcoholics and problem drinkers:

- Tremors
- Agitation
- Anxiety and panic attacks
- Paranoia and delusions
- Hallucinations (usually visual)
- Nausea and vomiting
- Increased body temperature
- Elevated blood pressure and heart rate
- Convulsions
- Seizures

What are the Dangers of Alcohol Abuse?

In addition to risk of injury or death as a result of accident or violence, alcohol abuse poses a broad range of physiological and psychological dangers.

Neurological dangers include impaired vision and impaired motor coordination, memory defects, hallucinations, blackouts, and seizures. Long-term consumption can result in permanent damage to the brain.

Cardiological problems include elevated blood pressure and heart rate, risk of stroke and heart failure.

Respiratory dangers include respiratory depression and failure, pneumonia, tuberculosis, and lung abscesses. Additionally, alcohol abuse increases the risk of mouth and throat cancer.

Liver disease caused by chronic alcohol abuse, including alcoholic fatty liver, hepatitis, and cirrhosis, kills 25,000 Americans each year.

Other physiological dangers include damage to the **gastrointestinal system** (including duodenal ulcers, reflux, and diarrhea), the **pancreas**, and the **kidneys**. In addition, alcohol consumption may cause malnutrition, disrupt the absorption of nutrients in food, and suppress the **immune system**, thus increasing the potential for illness.

Psychological angers include impaired judgment and verbal ability, apathy, introversion, antisocial behavior, inability to concentrate, and deterioration of relationships with family, friends, and co-workers.

How Does Alcohol Affect Pregnancy?

Alcohol is an especially dangerous drug for pregnant women. Drinking during pregnancy raises the risk of low-birthweight babies and intrauterine growth retardation, increasing the danger of infection, feeding difficulties, and long-term developmental problems. Heavy drinking during the early months of pregnancy can result in the birth of babies with fetal alcohol syndrome. These infants are likely to have irreversible physical abnormalities, including small skulls, abnormal facial features, and heart defects, and to suffer retarded growth and mental development. Chronic abuse of alcohol can lead to addiction or alcoholism. The behavior of abusers and the consequences of that behavior are better indicators of alcoholism than how often or how much a person may drink. Alcohol addiction can be characterized by increased tolerance, causing the abuser to drink greater amounts to achieve the same desired effect. When an alcoholic stops drinking, he or she will typically experience the symptoms of withdrawal.

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